

When a Medical Proxy Saves a Life

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“I’m begging you,” pleaded my 93-year-old grandmother. “I want to quit while I’m ahead. I’m too tired. It’s been a good, solid run and I’m done.”

I was sitting in my cubicle in Midtown Manhattan trying to untangle the phone cord so I could hear every word of the argument she was making from her hospital room in Florida, where doctors were waiting to hear if they should go ahead with surgery to treat her sepsis, or take her to hospice, where she would most likely die of the infection by the end of the week.

“I understand,” I said, resigned to letting her go. “I’m on your side. It’s your life. Let me talk to Mom one more time.”

My grandmother had agreed to make my mother, her daughter-in-law, her health care proxy — which meant that Mom was responsible for making her medical decisions, should she be unable to make them on her own. But neither of them fully understood the legal details and to my grandmother, at least, Mom had the final say. If Grandma was going to forgo the surgery, Mom had to agree. And she didn’t.

“Everyone assumes that because Grandma’s 93 she can’t be suicidal,” my mother told me, a few minutes later. “Judith is clinically depressed. She needs the surgery and she needs antidepressants.”

My mother’s pro-surgery argument felt a bit ironic. As my mother tells it, my father’s last words to her, before he went into a routine surgery, were: “And God help you if anything happens to me. You’d be stuck with my parents.”

He died of cardiac arrest several days later. I was 10 months old.

When I was growing up, my grandparents lived 10 minutes away, and my grandmother would show up at our doorstep unannounced, rearrange my room, sign me up for dance lessons and give so much unwanted child-rearing advice she could have inspired the term “helicopter grandparenting.” Her mantra was, “Do whatever your heart desires,” while my mother’s was, “If you’re an artist, you’re an unhappy waitress.” My grandmother was all about heart; my mother, all about practicality.

My mother’s friends urged her to sever ties with the in-laws. “It’s not worth it,” they’d say. “That woman’s making you crazy.” Like a child growing up with parents on the verge of divorce, I felt torn between my mother and grandmother. And I was always aware that I was the remaining link keeping them together.

But after my grandfather died and my grandmother moved to Florida at age 90, that began to change. I was able to see my grandmother only once a year, during my vacation time. My mother, however, talked with her daily and visited constantly. When my grandmother got sick, it was my mother who organized her care. She claimed that she did all this out of obligation but there seemed to be more to it. She placed stunning pictures of my grandmother in her 20s around her bed to remind the nurses that she was a real person, who was once as youthful as they were.

So when my mother refused to let Grandma go into hospice, I wondered for the first time if her famous objectivity was giving way to attachment — if she was being logical about my grandmother’s depression, or if she was just having trouble saying goodbye.

In the end, my mother told my grandmother that she would declare her mentally ill if she didn’t sign the necessary surgery paperwork, and my grandmother essentially went into surgery against her own will. I sobbed into my keyboard, imagining her being wheeled off like a helpless infant.

My grandmother had the surgery, went through a rough recovery and went on anti-depressants.

And then she started painting. An exhibit of her abstract watercolors was put up in the local recreation center, receiving multiple awards. She made it her mission to write a book of poems that “properly” rhymed. She hand-wrote one, about riding the bus in New York City, on a receipt and put it in an envelope addressed to The New York Times, where it was [published](#) months later.

She started dance classes in her wheelchair. There, she was sought after by every man in the community. “I can’t be bothered with any of them,” she’d tell me, guzzling her daily can of Diet Coke. “Unfortunately it’s just an unattractive bunch.”

Women desperately wanted to befriend her, but she became a bit of geriatric Mean Girl, claiming that few were witty enough. “Plus, these women are immature,” she’d say. “I mean, they’re in their 80s. They’re babies.”

When, seven years after my grandmother’s surgery, my mother and I went to Florida to celebrate her 100th birthday, we laughed hysterically as she opened a congratulatory letter from a Republican president she despised. We threw confetti while listening to her name being read on the “Today Show.” She told stories about every decade into my video camera, remembering how wildly convenient life felt when the refrigerator was invented. As she blew out her three-digit candle, she said, “Wendy, make sure you keep doing what you love.”

Before she died at 102, she was able to see photos of my newborn daughter, her great-grandchild.

At her grave site, my mother, who had never been close to her own mother, turned to me and remarked: “Isn’t life crazy? In some ways, Judith was the mother I never really had.” I thought, it is. And in return you gave her nine of the best years of her life.

Lately I’ve felt like being a mother myself means the end of my own creative chapter. A third mantra comes to mind, though, when I think of my mother and my grandmother, one that is both romantic and acutely practical: “Sometimes just when you think you’re done, you’ve only just begun.”

Wendy Spero is the author of the essay collection “Microthrills: True Stories From a Life of Small Highs.”

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